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**Introduction to *The Things They Carried* – Author and Themes**

**PARAPHRASE** this section in your own words (make it shorter and more clear).

**Award-winning author Tim O'Brien has incorporated his experience in Vietnam into several of his novels and short stories. Drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968, he served in the 23rd Infantry Division, also known as the Americal Division.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) is considered one of the finest books about the Vietnam War. Far from a combat story of pride and glory, it is a compassionate tale of the American soldier, brimming with raw honesty and thoughtful reflection. The book's narrator follows a platoon of infantrymen through the jungles of Vietnam. We see them trudge through the muck of a constant downpour, get hit by sniper fire, pull body parts out of a tree, laugh while they tell their stories to each other, and fall silent when faced with making sense of it all—both in the moment and twenty years later.

The book is split into a lush mosaic of vignettes drawn from O'Brien's own experiences. The title story describes what the soldiers must lug with them—both literally and figuratively—as they march: food, canteens, flak jackets, and weapons, as well as grief, terror, secrets, and memories. In another story, O'Brien tells of a young medic who brings his high-school sweetheart to his aid station in the mountains of Vietnam, chronicling her transformation from an innocent girl in a pink sweater to a cold night stalker who dons a necklace of human tongues. Yet another story tells of a soldier back from the war who drives his Chevy around his Iowa hometown, struggling to find meaning in his new life.

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Central to the book is O'Brien's unique style, which blurs the lines between fact and fiction, then examines how and why he does just that. O'Brien challenges readers to ponder larger philosophical questions about truth and memory, and brings the reader closer to the emotional core of the men's experiences. "For the common soldier," O'Brien writes in "How to Tell a True War Story," "war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true."

*The Things They Carried* is not just a tale of war, and the book's themes are no less relevant today than they were decades ago. This award-winning work is a brutal, sometimes funny, often profound narrative about the human heart—how it fares under pressure and what it can endure.

**Mortality and Death** - The threat, even expectation, of death hangs over all of the soldiers throughout the novel, and multiple deaths occur throughout the novel. The thoughts of the soldiers and the narrative itself circle around and around these soldiers deaths, trying and failing over and over to process and understand what happened, and showing how the deaths impact the thoughts and actions of the soldiers who remain both during and after the war.

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**Social Obligation** - O'Brien often focuses on how the men in his stories, even if they volunteered to fight, joined the army because of the unspoken pressure to fulfill their obligations as citizens and soldiers. These social obligations range from that of wider society (government, city/town) and narrows to the nuclear (family, friends, personal reflection).

**Storytelling and Memory** - Storytelling in *The Things They Carried* operates on multiple levels: at the level of the book itself, the stories within stories, and the reflections on the value of these stories both in the context of the war and then post-war. The collection further explores the very role and purpose of "war stories," and how they can be told "correctly" and how to tell whether or not one is "true." The author clearly believes that stories have the power to give an entire life to those who have passed on.